

CHICAGO VIDEO

Visual Narratives: New Chicago Video
at the Center for New Television, Chicago, IL
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By John Minkowsky

Throughout the early years of video, most practitioners of that emergent form abstained from theatrics, storytelling, and other conventions of broadcast television in an attempt to appropriate and, at the same time, redefine the medium as a suitable vehicle for visual artists. There were, of course, notable exceptions: William Wegman and Eleanor Antin, among a few others, employed narrative in low-budget parodies that commented on their confrontation with the most powerful and pervasive communications medium in history. And Vito Acconci's stunning one-on-one faceoffs with the viewer acknowledged TV's inherently intimate nature and incisively fused conceptual strategies with confessional modes of discourse. Video art's closest relative, The New American Cinema, had already demonstrated a penchant for radical autobiography (Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, Carolee Schneemann, et. al.) and trenchant comedy (the works of Ron Rice and the Kuchar Brothers come immediately to mind) as a means of subverting, stylistically, just about every principle commonly associated with mainstream narrative film.

"Southland Video Anthology," a formidable collection of tapes by Southern California makers, organized by David Ross at the Long Beach Museum of Art in 1976-77, heralded the full-fledged emergence of narrative video. The Hollywood milieu, with its impact on the growing establishment of performance artists, was cited as influential; the concurrent trend, on both coasts, toward figurative art suggests more common tendencies, at once fashionable and reactionary, among visual artists.

Video art in Chicago, by distinction, has long been associated with the concept of "electronic visualization." This was largely a commitment to abstraction, as practiced and preached by artists/teachers like Dan Sandin and Tom DeFanti at the University of Illinois and Phil Morton, Barbara Latham, and others at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. They established the single most hospitable environment for the exploration of imaging potentials unique to TV and computer technology. But the passion for image processing has, of late, it would appear, merged in Chicago with other concerns, among them the problems and pleasures associated with postmodern talespinning. This is manifested in "Visual Narratives: New Chicago Video," a selection of 11 experimental works by 10 artists, ably curated by Jeanine Mellinger for the Center for New Television and the Randolph Street Gallery.

Illuminating at moments, a trifle pretentious at others, the program is, for a sampling its size, remarkably consistent thematically and conceptually. The tapes are mostly devoid of comic relief, self-conscious and cynical, oblique in their narrative strategies, and more heavily reliant on print than on spoken text. They are also, with few exceptions, worth

watching. Refreshingly absent are parodies of commercial TV, but one is given to wonder, knowing Chicago's techy reputation, about the current status of interactive narrative, the most exciting mode of electronic art in recent years, within this particular arts community. The "special effects" employed in most of the tapes, however, pay homage in interesting ways to the city's video heritage.

The program commences with two works influenced by the conventions of other visual media. Kevin Huotari's *Mystery and Intrigue: Myth and Ideology* (1986), the sole piece to dispense entirely with text, tinkers successfully with the elements of *film noir*. Shots of a faceless, hard-boiled detective, counterposed with footage of what seems a meeting between secret conspirators, are accompanied by an evocative '50s-type saxophone score. Huotari's digital processing of the "surveillance" footage purposefully renders much of it all but incomprehensible, thereby extending a tradition of cinematic fiction in which the relation between truth and photographic documentation is called into question.

She Heard Voices (1986), Ed Rankus' contribution, is pointedly mute, the only silent work in the series. Written text, which offers clues about the protagonist's hallucinations, is derived from Max Ernst's *The Hundred Headless Woman*; Rankus' piece is obviously inspired by classic surrealism and subsequent dream motifs in the visual arts. While Rankus is probably the most accomplished artist in the program, I have problems with someone of his talent appropriating (although obviously reinterpreting) earlier ideas and styles (as he has also done in the past) rather than finding his own voice and speaking through it. These reservations aside, *She Heard Voices* is extraordinarily well-crafted, strong in concept, and filled with hauntingly beautiful imagery.

The Desecration of Innocence (1986) by Sasha Sumner is composed of diary entries presented as a sequence of white words written crudely on a black background by an adolescent who signs each passage "Love, Barbie." spurts of sonic accompaniment and four brief segments of camera imagery underline the raw, but powerful, prose, which starts by describing classroom gum-chewing and a first cigarette and ends with fantasies of sadomasochism and murder. I know nothing of Sumner's previous efforts, but her chronology here of corruption improves with repeated viewings; she gradually and with subtlety speeds the race of words and thus, better than any other artist in the program, demonstrates an understanding of temporal modulation as narrative device.

Other works also fare well. Tapes by Annette Barbier, Beth Berolzheimer, and Sharon Sterling, which raise issues about the distinctions between narrative art and extended metaphor, are ambitious and worthy of serious consideration. Sterling's contribution, *You Get What You Deserve* (1986) mixes meat and mythos; the Grimm Brothers' tale of "Little Briar-Rose" (better known as "Sleeping Beauty") is the focal point of a montage that includes women repeatedly falling down stairs in slow motion, a poster of Rambo as backdrop to testimony of a failed relationship, and someone licking and sewing up a raw turkey drumstick. All this, which makes more sense emotionally than logically, may indicate the introduction of a promising new practitioner.

Annette Barbier's *Forced Perspectives* (1986) and Beth Berolzheimer's *Acts* (1985) are more finely wrought. Both artists are masterful in their abilities with specialized electronic technology (such as the Sandin Image Processor), but the works here feel unfinished, more like chapters than completed statements. Barbier's tape, staged in an abandoned apartment seen through a fisheye lens, is about a woman's absence and the vestiges of her presence, and contains the most effective graphic display of computer-generated text in the program.

Arturo Cubacub has been a familiar Chicago presence for some time, and several of his earlier works, like *Ahluvyalike*, demonstrated both craft and wit. His recent efforts, shown in two tapes from his "Exploded Views" series (1985-86), seem inept and ill-placed. There is little excuse for a self-described Renaissance Man (and the maker credits himself as poet, musician, dancer, painter, and video and computer artist) who is incapable, as in *La Ci Darem la Mano*, of an audible sound mix that might have successfully established the connection between love and vampirism to which the artist *seems* to have aspired. *Orbit*, Cubacub's other entry, is an uninspired dance piece with some slick computer graphics. It does not belong in this program because it is neither narrative nor interesting; this was the curator's sole gaffe.

But another dance piece, *Love Makes Shadows of Us All* (1986), is in its simple and direct approach far more engaging. The artist, Karla Berry, describes and enacts an odd *pas de deux* with a dream lover ("It's hard to dance through all that sticky stuff, that goo," she says at one point). Although the work is a bit naïve in concept, the artist's autobiographical – and non-elliptical – style is refreshing.

In John Timmerman's *Vision Test* (1987), the dense and intriguing tape with which "Visual Narratives: New Chicago Video" concludes, an adolescent protagonist with perceptual/psychological problems is hinted at, but his story, *per se*, is only of importance as it suggests more formal concerns about the ways in which language and images affect each other. An open-ended bit of Timmerman's text serves as a general commentary about all of the works in this exhibition "His is the world of language fractured by the images which arise from it, or ... the reverse could be true."

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